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Northwest Youth Corps teams help revegetation efforts in Olympics

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Helena Vieira and Searah Kennedy, members of Northwest Youth Corps, plant native alpine grasses, herbs, and flowers at the top of Hurricane Ridge's Hurricane Hill trail, while team leader Hunter Bierce and team member Wesley Tils dig trenches.

Leader photo by Lily Haight

Wake up at 6 a.m. Roll out of sleeping bag. Work clothes on. Shoes on. Coffee brewed. Oatmeal eaten. On top of the mountain by 8 a.m.

This is the morning routine of six young adults from the Northwest Youth Corps program, ranging in age from 22 to 25, who for a total of eight weeks will be living outdoors, sleeping in tents, and working 10-hour days in the name of conservation.

Their days are not easy. Fueled by coffee and tortillas that they fill with peanut butter, jelly and animal crackers and shovel down during their noon lunch break, these young people are getting their hands dirty, digging trenches at the top of Hurricane Ridge and planting native alpine plant species.

"You determine your own quality of life here," said Hunter Bierce, a 24-year-old from Ohio, and one of the team's leaders. Bierce and Owen Wickenheiser, a 22-year-old from Pennsylvania, have led groups of youth and young adults from the Northwest Youth Corps throughout the summer, working in partnership with National Park Service staff to help restore areas of the Olympic National Park.

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"There are going to be bad days. People like their alone time, which is very slim out here," Wickenheiser said. But for the most part, the group of six is content: they're an efficient group, working their way up the Hurricane Hill trail, leaving fresh plantings and signs that say, "Stay on designated trails to preserve these meadows," behind them. As they head farther and farther up the trail, they're surrounded by a stunning display of mountain peaks — at least on sunny days.

At night, they collapse into their tents by 9 p.m., ready to do it all again the next day.

"I sleep in my work clothes," said Nick Holton, one of the team members. "I get up, throw my boots on, and then I'm ready to go."

Not Your Average Post-College Job

For Holton, working with a revegetation crew at the top of Hurricane Ridge was not where he saw himself when he graduated from college.

"I went to four years of school for automotive aftermarket. ... I did that, had my internships, got a job right out of college, you know, like you're supposed to," Holton said.

As a 23-year-old who comes from Michigan, Holton was on the track he thought he was supposed to be on. He had a job, he was making money. But he wasn't happy.

"Growing up, it's always about, 'You've got to make money, you have to have a real job, you have to support yourself,'" Holton said. "But I was just sitting at a desk all day, with no windows to look outside."

So he took a leap. He found a job listing for the Northwest Youth Corps online, applied, and was accepted. The next thing he knew, he was at the top of Hurricane Ridge with five others, helping the National Parks with their revegetation project.

"It was a huge step," Holton said. "When I went to college, my life was on a single track. And I kind of took a big turn, so who knows what I'll decide to do when I get home in six weeks."

For the other team members, who come from all over the U.S., including Pennsylvania, Ohio and Missouri, their stories are similar. They feel the pressure to have what's considered a "normal" life, but the call of the outdoors is stronger.

"I hated what I was doing, so I just took the first leap out here. ... I've always wanted to live out here so I pushed myself, just on my own," said Searah Kennedy, a 24-year-old from Pennsylvania who graduated with a degree in health sciences, and feels the conservation work was extremely important. "Not many people our age will do this work. We're in shape and willing to get out there. A lot of us see it as an opportunity."

For Kennedy and Holton, who are considering changing their career paths, the Youth Corps conservation program is helping them make connections within the Parks, so that they may be able to get a job working outdoors in the future.

"Working with this organization for four months, I've met so many people from National Parks, Forest Service, DNR, and all the major players in the outdoors industry," Wickenheiser said, adding that while he is glad to help the environment, working with Youth Corps is also a personal investment in his future. "I'm a climber, and I'm not going to make money climbing. But this keeps me out here, keeps me in areas where I can keep climbing, and connects me with jobs down the road that will help me fuel my passion."

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Stewardship and Accountability

The Northwest Youth Corps began in 1984 and was modeled after the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s. In 1984, support from Oregon's forest products industry and grants from four Northwest foundations allowed NYC to start its first program and serve 52 teens.

Now, it serves over 1,000 youth and young adults, teaching young people skills that they can use later in life, as well as instilling the ideas of stewardship and accountability into a new generation.

"A lot of the research that's coming out recently around the millennial and Z generations, it shows that both of those generations are actually really committed to giving back. And I think it's about trying to 'figure it out,'" said Jay Satz, senior director of partnerships and innovation at NYC. "I think the idea of service is way more deeply inculcated in these generations than they get credit for."

For the group of young people working at Hurricane Ridge, preserving parks is incredibly important for their own lives and futures.

"The degree to which I can enjoy myself without feeling guilty is directly correlated with how well the environment around me is doing," Bierce said. "I almost feel like I'm exploiting places when I'm visiting them, unless I'm being very mindful about it."

For the past couple of weeks, the team has been restructuring "social trails" in Olympic National Park. Social trails are trails created over time by visitors, who wander off the marked trail to take pictures, or go to the bathroom, or check out a new part of the land. Walking through the meadows may seem harmless, but the alpine plants are actually very fragile and can take a long time to grow back.

"This project represents a win-win-win partnership between Olympic National Park, Northwest Youth Corps and the National Park Foundation. The park has important work to get accomplished post-summer, when the seasonal workforce winds down; Northwest Youth Corps has willing and committed young corps members to do the work; and the National Park Foundation recognizes the value of not only supporting parks, but also facilitating youth conservation service as part of that support." Satz said.



The program also helps the Youth Corps members educate themselves and others about taking care of public land. While accessibility to the Park is important, sometimes park users don't know how to treat their surroundings. Rules such as, "stay on the marked trail," can seem arbitrary to people who don't know about the fragility of wildlife.



“People think, ‘Oh, we can walk all over it, it will be fine, it will just re-grow.’ It’s pretty harsh up here, the wind is blowing, there is snow on the plants for maybe five months,” Wickenheiser said.

For the Youth Corps team, the issues facing the Parks are visible while they’re working there.

“I’ve always felt passionate about the outdoors and enjoyed being in nature,” said Helena Vieira, a 24-year-old from Philadelphia who studied environmental science at university. She and the other team members expressed how often people visiting Hurricane Ridge would ask the team what they were working on, and why.

“I think education is extremely important. Nature needs to be accessible to everybody, but everyone needs to be very aware of the boundaries and how to properly respect it,” she said.

Lack of Funding For Parks

In the last few years, the National Park Service has suffered a big hit to federal funding and is experiencing a backlog in maintenance work to the Parks.

On top of that, the Land and Water Conservation Fund expired Sept. 30. It was created by Congress in 1964 to safeguard natural areas and water resources, and provide recreation opportunities. Over the past five decades, the LWCF has invested over \$675 million to protect Washington’s parks and recreational areas, like Olympic National Park. Because Congress did not renew the fund, the National Park Service has lost over \$1 million in funding.

“One of the dichotomies of the Park Service is that management dollars and resources decline as visitation rises,” Satz said. “The funding scheme is so broken right now. There’s a \$12 billion backlog in the entire Park system right now on deferred and cyclical maintenance.”

Members of the Youth Corps team said lack of funding should be made up by individuals becoming aware of the issues and educating themselves and others.

“There needs to be more outreach and with that, more funding where these Parks just don’t have it,” Wickenheiser said. “They can’t put people at every corner, saying, ‘Hey, can you stay off the trails.’ They just don’t have that manpower.”

Policing yourself as a park user and educating your friends and family is one way that the Youth Corps team hopes things can change, so the Parks can continue to be for everybody but won’t be loved to the point of destruction.

For young people coming of age in a world where the effects of climate change is beginning to be more and more visible, the challenges they face can seem enormous. Still, they’re out there, doing what they can each day to preserve the natural beauty of the world.

“That’s why this job can be so great. You can see the direct impact that you’re having on the landscape or maybe some people that you told to not walk on trails anymore,” Wickenheiser said. “On a grand scheme, I can’t stop pollution. ... But I can make an impact.”

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